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## Diversity, Culture, and Islam in Higher Education: An Anthropological Approach

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DIVERSITY, CULTURE, AND ISLAM IN HIGHER EDUCATION: AN  
ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH

by

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Under the Direction of Cassandra White, PhD

ABSTRACT

Venues of higher education such as universities play a crucial role in exposing students/people to other religions and cultures, contributing positively or negatively to this significant endeavor. Most universities have courses designed to create and share knowledge regarding major faiths of the world. In the US, this endeavor gains additional significance in the current climate of growing tensions around identity and religion, particularly with regard to Islam. This research examines how Islam is represented in a world religion and introductory level courses in higher education particularly at the undergraduate level. Through an ethnographically designed methodology, this study focuses on patterns of approach from an anthropological perspective drawing on a theological framework of Islam as a discursive tradition. I argue that instead of a purely ritualistic or theological approach to Islam, a cultural, contextual and a critical studies approach, particularly at the introductory level is more effective and relevant.

INDEX WORDS: Religious literacy, discursive tradition, objectification of Islam

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by

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## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my family and friends. Without their unconditional support and encouragement this journey could not have been possible.

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I would like to express my deep gratitude to Dr. Cassandra White for her compassion, guidance, understanding and unconditional support; Dr. Jennifer Patico for her astute analytical guidance and Dr. Louis Ruprecht for always encouraging me to push my intellectual boundaries. Thank you!

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## INTRODUCTION

Sites of higher education such as universities play a crucial role in exposing students to other religions and cultures, contributing positively and negatively to this significant endeavor. Inter-faith awareness from a humanistic point of view is central to this undertaking; hence, most universities have courses designed to create and share knowledge regarding major faiths of the world. In the United States, this task gains additional significance in the current climate of growing tensions around identity and religion particularly with regard to Islam. My research explores the representation/teaching of Islam within a world-religion as well as introductory level courses, and how these representations impact students' understandings of and perspectives on Islam outside of the classroom. Utilizing qualitative ethnographic methods, I pay particular attention to how instructors structure their messages and choose to include specific kinds of information over others. Are representations of Islam in college/university classrooms paying attention to the range of cultural, historical experiences and expressions of faith, or do they adhere to a textual, theological approach that is decontextualized, and therefore counterproductive to building cross-cultural and inter-religious understanding? Beyond curriculum design, vision, and pedagogy, I have endeavored to briefly examine the ongoing anthropological debate about defining Islam within the context of what some anthropologists are referring to as “anthropology of Islam” with the intention of providing a multi-disciplinary perspective. I have paid special attention to the understanding of implicit and explicit nuances and patterns in curriculum visions, designs, and frameworks that are being applied to the teaching of Islam in higher education.

Although, the globally diverse cultural context of a faith-tradition such as Islam might appear challenging to define, but at the same time it also presents a brilliant opportunity for educators to tailor their curriculum and pedagogies for the sake of accommodating culturally-guided interactive learning. Amongst anthropologists of Islam, there exists an ongoing debate and a struggle to define Islam. El-Zein's suggestion in the face of the diversity of interpretation within Islam is to replace the term "Islam" with "Islams" (El-Zein 1977). Whereas, Zareen Grewal warns against the problem of confusing "Muslim diversity for multiplicity" (Grewal 2016, 50). My desire is to explore the capacities within our universities to observe, understand, and analyze the conceptual, cultural, and humanistic discourses within the scope of courses offered to university students. I have also explored some of the existing theoretical models (both anthropological and inter-disciplinary) related to Islam and reflect on its relevance and its potential beneficial influence on the process of dissemination of knowledge in higher education. My ultimate goal is to be able to suggest some best practices from an academic and cultural context using an anthropological lens.

### **Background, Context, and Scope**

A religion or faith is never practiced in a void, rather it is always an important part of any given society and culture. Its study requires the analysis of conditions that are positively or negatively impacting human capacity for a peaceful and fruitful co-existence with all its inter-religious and intra-religious diversity, socio/cultural inclusiveness (of religious minorities), and enhanced sense of humanism. Therefore, it is necessary to approach religious study with an inter-disciplinary lens. It is important to be cognizant of our own positionality from which we are engaging in the meaning-making process of the human-other. It is crucial to not limit studies of

Islam or Muslim societies to merely an analysis of concepts and doctrines. For instance, consider the experience of a Muslim women living in Taliban-controlled region in Afghanistan where a pre-Islamic Pashtun tribal codes common in that region requires her to cover herself from head to toe, which is a very different experience from a Muslim woman who is residing in Turkey, where wearing a headscarf is considered a betrayal of Turkish national ideals of secularism. In Senegal, Sufi and mystical interpretation of Islam plays an influential role, whereas in Saudi Arabia, such interpretation is banned by the Wahabi religious ideology favored by the state. Muslims in China are considered an ethnic minority rather than a religious minority, compared to Pakistan which is a Muslim majority state in which politicization of religion have led to sectarian violence. Therefore, the socio/cultural and political contexts in which diverse Muslim communities live and practice their faith is an important context in understanding Islam and Muslims.

In the Western context the socio/political lens becomes even more relevant in the current environment of Islamophobia. Although the heightened Islamophobia and the increased marginalization of American Muslim citizens in the United States is deemed as a direct result of 9/11 and its aftermath, its contributing factors are neither limited to that horrific tragedy, nor to the war on terror; it is in fact much more nuanced and complicated. The exploitation and exaggerated attitude of bias, and political agendas of government officials as are reflected in the ongoing rhetoric of current government are exacerbating fear, insecurity, and unrest. What is more discouraging is the relevance of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (published pre-9/11 in 1979) to understanding Islamophobia. Although Said did not use the term Islamophobia, his work certainly provided a foundational analysis of this phenomenon (Haddad and Harb 2014, 479). The so-called post 9/11 war on terror has re-created the dangerous rhetoric of “us” against

“them”. Since then, this fractious ideology has proven to be particularly pernicious to the promotion of an inclusive and pluralistic society.

The exploitation and exaggeration of Islamophobia by individuals and groups for politically motivated agendas or other unethical considerations seem to have shifted from being implicit marginalization to an explicit one thus is further enabling exaggeration and validation of racial, xenophobic, and anti-Islam sentiments amongst communities in the United States. This fractious rhetoric is more problematic and somewhat ironic considering the historical context of American nation-building has been based on secularism, therefore, religion must not determine the nationalistic identity or rights of its citizens (Salem 2013, 80-81), so how is marginalization on the basis of religion becoming so rampant in today's America? The othering of religious minorities along with racial discrimination is still alive and thriving despite democratization being portrayed as a one-stop-solution to all the perils of injustice and discrimination. Moreover, presence of a ‘sub-citizen’ within our nationalistic ideology is a sad reminder and a painful left-over echo of our historical footprints which also must not be ignored; The nation-state was “built on the subjugation of the other in support of the superior nation and its citizens” (Salem 2013, 81). Hence, when we witness the efforts exerted by U.S. government policies to reform Islam, it is an interest, not “in neutralizing the space of politics from religion but is rather in producing a particular kind of religious subject who is compatible with the rationality and exercise of liberal rule” (Mahmood 2006; Haddad and Harb 2014, 483).

The role of the media in this crisis cannot be ignored as a major contributor towards furthering the trope of Muslims as "enemy within," either intentionally (possible political, racial, or xenophobic agendas) or due to misconceived and misinterpreted religious, social, and cultural concepts. The western media's continuous portrayal of Islam as a violent religion prone to

terrorism has further intensified the phobia against American Muslims. Illustration of veiled women along with the news of terrorism worked to strengthen the link between Islam and terrorism. Not only that, but this image also leads to essentializing Muslims as being backward, oppressive to women, and the uncivilized ‘other’ (CIFTCI 2012, 295). Amidst these challenging social, political, and cultural conditions in contemporary America, individuals (of all ages) and communities are living, interacting, defending and negotiating matters of identity, civil rights and liberties, safety and security on multiple sites. The sites which I endeavored to study are university classrooms in the United States of America. Universities are prime spaces where people are given the opportunity to engage with the “other” through intercultural and interreligious interaction (Gill 2016, 483). Sites of higher education have the capacity to make available a safe place for students to learn and appreciate human diversity. The ever-increasing distrust among people of different faith is not due to differences in ideologies, instead, it is a product of ignorance and misinformation. Knowledge gained through first-hand engagement is much more reliable and beneficial compared to the ideas that are being fed by media or politically motivated groups. However, this places a weighty responsibility on the shoulders of educators, especially those who teach Islam.

As a Muslim living in this fragile socio/politically charged United States, I believe in the power of knowledge especially amid conflict and discrimination. During one of my undergraduate semester four years ago, I enrolled in a course on world religion in the university. Unfortunately, I came out of that course quite disillusioned. I hoped to learn more about different faiths of the world by engaging with explorative and comparative material and learn through interactive discussion. I was really looking forward to examining at historical, civilizational and contemporary context, basically knowledge that I cannot gain from a bookstore or the world-

wide-web. Although the teacher did have the basic pedagogy of dividing us for group discussion and then regroup to discuss as a class, the majority of students seemed less engaged and felt disconnected with the material. I spoke with several of my classmates to gauge their impression of the class and mostly received a non-committal shrug. I also noticed that on several occasions some students tried to raise questions comparing the reading material to their own belief system but were not able to get a response due to lack of time. I had two other opportunities during my undergraduate years to attend seminar-style classes with religion-related courses. Both these courses had a very streamlined syllabus. Although it was completely lecture-based with some slides to provide visual stimulation, they were but mostly just monologues with sporadic discussions. Despite the simple delivery method, it was incredibly educational despite being information-heavy. Although we were limited in providing our views verbally during lecture, yet the class engagement was still evident in all the questions and comments that led to a more in-depth discussion. One of the possible reasons for the difference in the learning experiences could be related to instructors' knowledge base, lack of bias, demeanor and ability to make students feel relevant. I realize that all these qualities sound quite esoteric – however, they are also crucial. Another reason for this engaging learning experience was the reading material and its delivery. The instructor made the class pre-read historical reading material as a grounding foundation and then compared and complemented the historical learning with contemporary issues. Since then, I have been struggling with many questions regarding the difference in learning experiences even within the same department and institution. Is it a matter of the teacher's knowledge? Is it the teacher's training? Is there teacher's training available or mandatory for professors/instructors teaching in higher education specifically religion? Who gets

to design and control curriculum? What role does the funding, institutional and government policy play in curriculum design as to what topics to teach?

For this research, I am also concerned regarding the impact of commodification and bureaucratization of institutions of higher learning. For example, in my university, I see major re-modeling architecturally and in department portfolios. I find that now my university has created a specialized Global Studies Institute that work on conflicts and terrorism. Now when you enter that particular building, you can instantly feel the difference in ambiance and quality of building material. One professor commented that it feels more like a corporate office than university. As soon as you log onto the department website, you find it filled with faculty involved in media interviews and talking engagements. On the one hand, one can relate to the significance of being in a position of influence, and it would definitely impact the institution's position in state and national rating. However, I also wonder how this might influence institutional policies and funding. Would it push scholars and professors to engage in certain areas of research over other?

At this point, I would like to reiterate that higher education institutions such as colleges and universities are amongst one of those significant fields where world views are created, negotiated, contested, and even reinforced. Within this social structure, our educators hold an extremely significant position with regard to the dissemination of knowledge, facilitation of sharing that knowledge and are usually put in a role of a guide and thus are automatically placed in a fundamentally influential position. The stakes become even higher when religion and religious identity comes in the picture. In the context of current political environment, the real opportunity lies in understanding the Islamophobia, gauging the fear and anxiety, filling the knowledge gap, providing a contextual understanding, and finding a humanistic common ground.

Therefore, an ethnographic research and analysis from a teacher's point of view is crucial and significantly relevant in the present time.

Chapter One of my thesis contains anthropological perspectives on the matter of defining Islam. Since this study is an anthropological approach that is applied to Islamic Studies and education, I deem it imperative to layout existing work and theories on Islam in both the anthropological arena and the interdisciplinary fields. The purpose of this broader approach was to create a coherent and cohesive body of knowledge to share an existing and recommended approach to teaching Islam in higher education.

In chapter two, methodology and ethical considerations are discussed. Challenges, issues, and opportunities both anticipated and unexpected are also reviewed. Among the challenges are: the concept of studying up; the issue of access; and time limitations which have all played a significant role in shaping and changing the mode and progress of my research methodology. This process has taught me some valuable lessons which are also discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter three includes ethnographic learnings and analysis based on the perspectives of professors and instructors teaching Islamic Studies in higher education in the United States. In this chapter, I also discuss different approaches to teaching Islam as well as challenges and best practices from a teacher's point of view. Chapter four holds my conclusion.

## 1 LITERATURE REVIEW

My research aims to explore, understand, and analyze Islamic Studies in higher education in the United States of America. By utilizing a qualitative and ethnographic methodology I explore considerations in curriculum vision, design, and implementation that are being adopted and practiced by professors and scholars teaching Islamic studies in the United States of America. I am looking at how Islam is represented/taught within a world religion context as well as in Introductory-level courses, and how these representations impact student's understandings and perspectives on Islam outside of the classroom. Besides curriculum vision, design and implementation, I also explore the debate about defining Islam from an anthropological as well as inter-disciplinary perspective with the intention of engaging in a holistic and robust inquiry. The current increasingly volatile social and political conditions for Muslim minority citizens in the United States, which is further exacerbated by often misconstrued and sensationalized portrayal of Islam and Muslims in media, necessitates a well-researched, historically sound and culturally oriented curriculum to counter an Islamophobic narrative. Therefore, one of my fundamental guiding questions is to analyze whether Islamic Studies courses in colleges are able to present Islam in all its inherent diversity through a cultural and contextual approach, or whether they adhere to a more theological approach. In this chapter, I have endeavored to highlight some of the relevant anthropological and inter-disciplinary theories that have informed and influenced my research.

## 1.1 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

While searching for existing anthropological work related to my thesis topic, I found a curious lack of direct studies conducted by anthropologists on Islamic Studies in higher education. This is not to say that there has been no work done by anthropologists on the subject of Islam but rather, that I could not find any ethnographic research related directly to how Islam is presented/taught in institutions of higher education, nor could I find content on pedagogy related research on Islam as it is being taught in university classrooms in the United States. However, I did find literature related to the anthropology of Islam which connects to my project by providing a socio-cultural lens which in-turn help contextualize issues and nuances of an essentialized concept of Islam and a generalized community of a global Muslim body. Their insightful interpretations and findings as a result of their ethnographic field work have added tremendously valuable direction and have provided a meaningful foundation to my research. Therefore, this chapter includes an exploration of some of the existing research and theoretical frameworks established by anthropologists and other scholars that directly informs my work and provide contextual frames. I begin by looking into the challenge of defining Islam followed by discourses from inter disciplinary sources to explore topics such as: critical, and cultural pedagogies; religious literacy; discursive tradition; and deliberative religiosity, as they all directly inform my research.

## 1.2 Anthropology of Islam and the Problem of Defining Islam

One of the challenges for an anthropological study of Islam, or for that matter any scriptural monotheism, is “that these religions do not fit well in the normal ethnographic model. The text and rituals common to a monotheism transcend any particular locale” (Lukens-Bull 1999, 4). Amongst anthropologists of Islam, there exists an ongoing debate and struggle to define Islam. El-Zein’s suggestion in the face of diversity of interpretation within Islam is to replace the term ‘Islam’ with ‘Islams’ (El-Zein 1977), whereas, Zareen Grewal warns against the problem of confusing “Muslim diversity for multiplicity” (Grewal 2016, 50). The problems faced by anthropologists studying Islam and Islamic societies are similar to those studying other monotheistic societies, in that the essence of texts and rituals of monotheism takes believers outside of their locale or villages to the world-wide community and as such they “encode a sameness, a conformity, a remove from cultural specificity and social structure” (Lukens-Bull 1999, 4). Robert Redfield (1956) proposed a theoretical model of “great traditions” and “little traditions” with regard to all world religions. The “great tradition” are also called “textual traditions” or the “orthodoxy” as defined by urban elite. Whereas, the “little traditions” are that of the periphery or the heterodoxy and they incorporate many local traditions. According to this theory, “little tradition” gets transformed into the “great tradition” through universalization and parochialization. The anthropologist suggests that this theory can apply to all world religions including Islam; for instance, Islam spread from the Arabian Peninsula to much of the rest of the world suggests universalization. For instance, the practice of wearing a women’s garment called *jilbab* has its origin in Arab culture and not in Muhammad’s teachings is nearly practiced universally (Lukens-Bull 1999 4-5). This theoretical connection as applied to define Islam, to me

is problematic and falls short as it tends to downplay diversity of interpretation as reflected in different cultural traditions among Muslims around the world.

Although, the great/little tradition theory was applied to Islam as a way to address its internal diversity, it has been extensively criticized. For example, John R. Bowen (1993) thinks that this distinction may have been agreeable for anthropologists as it allowed them to study what they were accustomed to study, villages, and the job of understanding the texts to the orientalist. Furthermore, Bowen suggests that, as has been the convention, anthropologists and other social scholars when concerned with primarily local forms of culture, tend to focus on rites, ideas, concepts, and myths that made that particular group distinctive rather than on those which they shared with other Muslims. This theory also leads to a very narrow view of Islamic traditions (Lukens-Bull 1999, 6).

Talal Asad, another well-known anthropologist, is very critical of contemporary scholarship that attempts to define Islam and its diversity. He questions the increasing interest and publications by Western anthropologists related to Islam and Muslims, suggesting these to be politically driven. In *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (1986), Asad probes and critiques the conceptual basis of some of the published literature on Islam. He begins with two questions: “What, exactly is the anthropology of Islam?” and “What is its object of investigation?” He stresses that the conceptualization of Islam as an object is not a simple task, despite what some anthropologists might have you believe. Asad goes on to provide three answers to the posited questions: (1) “that in a final analysis there is no such theoretical object as Islam; (2) that Islam is the anthropologist’s label for a heterogeneous collection of items, each of which has been designated Islamic by informants; (3) that Islam is a distinctive historical totality which organized various aspects of social life” (Asad 1986, 93-94).

Asad rejects the first claim and critiques the anthropologist Abdul Hamid el-Zein's approach in *Beyond Ideology and Theology* (1977), where el-Zein posits that there are diverse forms of Islam and that each of these forms may be equally real, "equally worth describing." To this Asad objects that this contention asserts that these forms are "all ultimately expressions of an underlying unconscious logic. This curious slippage from an anthropological contextualism into Levi-Straussian universalism" (Asad 1986, 94). To the second idea that "Islam" is a label for a heterogeneous collection or traditions, Asad points to Michael Gilsenan's book *Recognizing Islam* (1982). Similar to el-Zein's approach, Gilsenan also suggests that all forms of Islam expressed in the field must be recognized as true versions of Islam and that all the different things that Muslims regard as Islamic; to that, Asad rejects this theory since "it is impossible to define beliefs and practices in terms of an isolated subject" (Asad 1986, 94). The third idea (that Islam is a distinctive historical totality which organizes various aspects of social life), Asad finds somewhat valuable but still ultimately unacceptable. Asad suggests that the alternative approach would be to consider Islam as a discursive tradition (Lukens-Bull 1999, 7).

Although approaching Islam as a discursive tradition holds value, Lukens-Bull defends el-Zein's contribution to the scholarly discourse regarding the inner diversity of Islam. El-Zein's suggestion was meant to present an alternative to the essentialist approach to Islam. Dale Eickelman (1987) also supports El-Zein and points out the neutrality of this approach of multiplicity of Islamic expressions as it does not privilege one over the other. It is interesting to note the implicit rebuttal to Asad's critique in El-Zein's work, as El-Zein disapproves of any anthropological work that is based on a theological, or quasi-theological approach to local traditions. Lukens-Bull also feels that Asad misinterpreted Gilsenan's work as well (1982). Gilsenan's aim was simply not to take at face value whatever Muslims in a local area say what

Islam is; rather he explored certain central features, such as the concepts of ‘barakah’, ‘ulamah’ that vary even within the Arab world.

The most interesting contribution, in my opinion, regarding Lukens-Bulls reflections is the way he reinterpreted Asad’s rejected ideas. He says:

The approaches which Asad hastily rejects contribute two important reminders. The first suggests that it is a mistake to study an Islamic study with a monolithic, essentialist conception of Islam; there may be as many forms of Islam as there are Muslims. The second suggests that it is crucial that we accept the self-identification of Muslims. If someone calls himself a Muslim and identifies certain practices as Islamic, as scholars, we must begin by accepting the statement as true and then examine how these practices differ from those of other Muslims. The question to be explored is why there are differences between various groups which identify themselves as Muslims. This is where Asad’s notion of Islam as a discursive tradition is most useful. As a discursive tradition, Islam is constantly being reshaped to fit with an ever-changing world (Lukens-Bull 1990, 9).

What El-Zein (1977), Gilsenan (1982), Dale Eickelman (1987), and Lukens-Bulls (1999), are struggling with is Islam’s internal diversity. The suggestion that, due to the non-essentialist concept of Islam, one must assume that there are as many forms of Islam as there are Muslims, in turn implies that any and every practice of Islam must be taken as authentic and then compared with other Muslims. Asad’s problem with the above might be due to the idea of a relativist Islam. I think, his purpose to suggest an approach to understanding Islam as a discursive tradition, fundamentally refers to explain and suggest diversity in Islamic practices while holding on to the normalized authentic version. He says “An Islamic discursive tradition is simply a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future, with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the present. Clearly, not everything Muslims say and do belongs to an Islamic discursive tradition” (Asad 2009, 20). Nevertheless, I have found Asad’s theoretical concept of discursive theory quite useful in informing my research.

### 1.3 Anthropological Perspectives in the Service of Higher Education

Although there seems to be a lack of studies done on Islamic curriculum and pedagogy development in American institutions of higher education, I did find anthropological activity within the higher education realm. Take for instance, Wesley Shumar's (2004) article titled *Making Strangers at Home*. Shumar, agrees that the number of anthropologists engaged in the study of higher education in the United States is small, but their methodological and theoretical contribution is significant. Strands of theoretical underpinnings influenced by postmodernism and poststructuralism have been utilized by many cultural anthropologists to understand issues such as culture of increased commodification due to globalization and neo-liberalistic ideals. He suggests that these and other theoretical models can contribute significantly towards the understanding and analysis of trends (both negative and positive), which in turn can empower the students, faculty and the administration to bring about positive change. For example, during his research on *College for Sale* (Shumar 1997), he realized that the role of a university president was changing from being an academic leader to a "front person in the marketing and fundraising efforts of a nonprofit" (Shumar 2004, 25) due to forces of globalization.

Shumar shares some areas of work where he feels that anthropological theoretical models have greatly influenced the research in higher education, for example Holland and Eisenhart's work in 1990s in which they utilized the analytic categories and processes which are conventionally used to study small scale and tribal societies, to understand our undergraduates' culture. The concept of utilizing ethnographic data that are acquired by focusing on a small group of individuals can enable an anthropologist to trace out larger social/cultural forces that are influencing society. Most importantly, Holland and Eisenhart's (1990) contribution signifies the

challenging endeavor of studying closer to home thus “making the familiar strange” (Shumar 2004, 31). One of the critical insights that Holland and Eisenhart’s work provide is the analysis of the ways in which gender status was accrued by the undergraduates. Male status was validated by his position on the institutional structure, for instance, his position in the football team. On the other hand, the female was judged by her ability to draw on support of male to do her favors. The connection to Bourdieu’s study in Kabyle society (Bourdieu 1977, 1980) is that we see a somewhat similar concept of honor for women supported and informed Holland and Eisenhart’s (1990) analysis of socially negotiable status for women in the context of undergraduates and posit that patriarchy was an integral part of the student culture and was very difficult to transform (Shumar 2004, 31).

William Tierney’s (1993) work also reflects the influence of Bourdieu’s (and others) social reproductionist and resistance approach. Tierney’s work not only includes students, but also faculty and administrative cultures, in higher education. One of the areas where Tierney’s work most connects to anthropological trends is Appadurai’s (Appadurai 1996) notion of disjuncture. While he sees the struggles in the United States and in the higher education due to globalization and postmodern conditions leading to a de-centering of the local and the individual, he sees multifaceted possibilities. Despite the emergence of new form of inequities accelerated by global systems, Tierney also sees the expansion in the opportunities of higher education in the United States. For him this is a ripe opportunity for minorities and marginalized groups (women, people of color, LGBTQ) to push for equality and a stronger voice in our higher education system (Shumar 2004, 32).

Tierney and Bensimon (1996) identify another problematic system in higher education structure, that is, the existing system of tenure and promotion of faculty. The existing system of

tenure and promotion inspire faculty to become more like a bureaucratic personality type and seem to create conditions where it is perceived that excellence in work and academic freedom is not quite valued and/or reinforced. What is needed, in their opinion, is to shift the focus in higher education from “management to mentoring” (Shumar 2004, 33).

Another significant discourse within the context of higher education in the United States is what is called a “hidden curriculum” or HC. A Hidden Curriculum is defined as “what is implicit and embedded in educational experiences in contrast with the formal statements about curricula and the surface features of educational interaction” (Sambell and McDowell 1999, 391-392). This concept overlooks the two main components of this classroom: the teacher and the student. Depending upon the unique and individual features, experiences and relationships of both, the teacher and the student, as well as the diversity of unexpected, “collateral learning...can therefore result from the encounter between a teacher, a curriculum and a student. The HC concept enables a necessary critique in an era when HE (higher education) is increasingly regarded as a technical matter of ‘checking boxes’” (Semper and Blasco 2018, 482). As teachers and students influence each other by learning through interaction, the HC concept is designed to reveal the difference between the curriculum design and curriculum in action. As a critique of Hidden Curriculum concept in higher education, it is argued that over emphasis of Hidden Curriculum concept when applied to higher education, may result in further perpetuation of hidden curriculum. Another critical analysis reveals a contradiction between explicit and implicit curricular goals in higher education (Semper and Blasco 2018, 485).

#### 1.4 Interdisciplinary Approaches to Teaching Islam

As the main focus of this research is on the teaching of Islam in higher education, it was important to explore critically and examine theories and framework that are being applied and recommended for the teaching of Islam within the context of higher education in the United States. Hence, the interdisciplinary outlook to my ethnography was the most effective approach. Building on Talal Asad's (1986; 2009) theory of approaching Islam as a discursive tradition, I find David Lewin's (2017) proposition of "deliberative religiosity" promising and relevant to my research. Lewin pushes for the urgency of much-needed religious literacy particularly in the current geopolitical context. In a post-secular age where religion is increasingly viewed "in opposition to criticality, as though religion entails an irrational and inviolable commitment...this narrow view of religion is reinforced by certain rather dogmatic secular framings of religion, which requires any and all forms of religious expression to be excluded from public life" (Lewin 2017, 73). Furthermore, a negative impact of such an intense exclusion of religion from the public, contributes to extreme forms of religion with "little social mediation through politically deliberative cultures" (Lewin 2017, 73). Such an approach of exclusion also leads to increased polarization and generates fractured debates regarding the place of religion in public as well as in society and since religions are "fundamentally public facing" and as such can bind communities together (Lewin 2017, 73). Lewin argues for a 'deliberative religiosity' which pushes for a religious attitude and positions that are not assumed to be "inviolable and irreconcilable... [but rather] religious views are in dialogue with their own (and perhaps other) traditions, such that religious positions and attitudes are open to critical encounter" (Lewin 2017, 76). Lewin is pushing for a hermeneutically-centered and deliberative religious literacy as a model for

religious education in a post secular age, so as to enable and enhance capacity for a pluralistic framework where “hermeneutical subtlety and deconstructing the propositional nature of religion will facilitate a better appreciation of the interpretive context of the student” (Lewin 2017, 80).

The anthropological and the interdisciplinary research in the service of higher education and Islamic studies as discussed in this chapter so far points at some of the implicit and explicit aspects impacting our learning process within the context of teaching in higher education.

Teaching in the current geopolitical environment along with overpowering neoliberal conditioning leading to increasing commodification, if left unchecked, can lead to increased bureaucratization within the institutions of higher learning. The lack of awareness and attention to issues of “hidden curriculum” can lead to higher education becoming increasingly a technical matter of ‘checking boxes.’ Teaching Islamic Studies in higher education gets equally impacted (if not more so) in the current geopolitical environment. Teaching religion in a secular context potentially provides a great opportunity to approach Religious Study in a culturally relevant manner. The significance of plurality and diversity that exists internally in religion particularly Islam must be a part of the narrative in teaching Islamic Studies in higher education in the United States.

## 2 RESEARCH METHODS AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This ethnographic endeavor was designed with the intention of understanding teachers' perspectives and curriculum considerations in teaching Islamic studies academically in the United States. Educators usually take up the role of guides and thus are automatically placed in a fundamentally influential position. The significance of their role increases exponentially once religion or religious identity comes in picture. Within the current political environment, Islamophobia, and consistent fear and anxiety amongst Muslim communities, religious literacy from a cultural and critical approach in an academic setting within institutions of higher education has the capacity to create opportunities for enhanced contextual religious knowledge which in turn can foster mutual understanding and respect on a common humanistic ground.

In this chapter, I describe and discuss the details of my approach and methodology for this research study including: the challenges of access; studying-up; and consequential changes that I decided to make due to limitation of time. I also reflect on ethical considerations for my research along with a brief discussion on my positionality (as a Muslim graduate student, among other aspects of my identity), and its possible impact on the research.

The methodology for this research is designed and grounded in qualitative data collection and analysis. I conducted seven semi-structured in-depth ethnographic interviews with professors who are either teaching or have taught Islam at universities and colleges in the United States. These interviews were conducted over the period of four months (Dec 2018- March 2019). My work was informed by an overarching literature review including anthropological as well as relevant inter-disciplinary existing research to guide, inform, and provide further context and background to my research, particularly related to approaches towards teaching Islamic Studies

academically at universities in the United States. I was also able to access syllabi on Islam (online) through American Academy of Religion (AAR) website from their “syllabus project” on teaching Islam. Moreover, some of the professors whom I interviewed also provided their syllabus upon my request which particularly helped in drawing out emerging thematic patterns in topics taught in similar courses that are being offered at different types of courses at universities.

## **2.1 Ethnographic Interviews**

Ethnographic interviews can range anywhere from being informal, semi-structured/ in-depth, or unstructured. For my research, I found the semi-structure/in-depth interview format most suitable. Semi-structured interviews are better suited if the interviewee has limited availability and due to this limitation chances are that he or she might be available only once and these interviews are only conducted as a scheduled activity. Although questions designed in a semi-structured interview are open ended, they have the capacity to cover a lot of topics in depth in an efficient manner (Bernard 2011, 156-158).

Since, for this research, I was able to conduct seven ethnographic in-depth semi-structured interviews of professors who are either currently teaching or have taught Islamic Studies in religious departments using a religion curriculum at college or a university in the United States. These interviews were audio recorded with the consent of the interviewees. The interviews lasted from one hour minimum to two hours maximum. I initiated my recruitment after I received approval from the Georgia State university’s Internal Review Board. Ethical considerations for my research were primarily fulfilled by following closely rules of engagement with human subjects as required by IRB, which included administration of informed consent,

responsible handling of notes and information, as well as protecting any personal data in order to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Notes and digital audio-recordings are kept on a personal, password protected computer. Recordings are to be destroyed after my thesis is completed approximately six months after the data were collected. Transcribed data are stored on the Student PI's password-protected computer but will not be destroyed. I have used pseudonyms to refer to participants of my research and they will be published as such. I have consciously refrained from naming any institutions, universities, or colleges that my interviewees are either currently associated with or were associated with in the past.

Since the aim of my study was to engage in a comparative and contextual understanding of different approaches that are being utilized in teaching Islamic Studies, I decided to create a list of some questions that might help me compare responses and hopefully draw out common themes and patterns as well as diversity in their teaching approaches. Keeping in mind the ethnographic and open-ended nature of my intended interviews I began by asking some basic questions related to their educational background, their interest and experience in teaching Islam academically, their challenges, and best practices among others. (The list of questions can be found in appendix A).

## **2.2 Inclusion Criteria and Ethical Considerations**

Inclusion criteria for this research were university professors who are teaching Islam or World Religion for an ethnographic interview. The reason and motivation for designing this project is deep concern and strong confidence in the power of education, especially higher education. Just as university campuses are increasingly viewed as sites of active and somewhat

intense religio/cultural/political negotiations and are producing more studies and programs to leverage this platform for various agendas (negative and positive), so are university classrooms.

Despite growing concerns from researchers and civic organizations regarding intolerance and marginalization of minorities including Muslims (especially identifiable Muslims who wear Hijab or other physical identity markers) on university campuses (both implicit and explicit marginalization), there is a lack of effective intervention programs to counter the traumatic impact of growing polarization. To make matters worse the polarization and intolerance is complex and multilayered with deeply historical and political underpinnings. A lack of ethnographic studies on higher education is referred to as “the averted gaze” by Wisniewski (2000). In his article published in the *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, he quotes Spindler (1988, 43) to the effect that “making the strange familiar will remain a basic task in transcultural ethnography. Making the familiar strange will continue to be a basic problem in the anthropology of schooling in our society” (Wisniewski 2000, 1). The colonial anthropological roots and the fascination of studying the ‘exotic’ and the ‘other’ as a validated zone of research, makes studying close to home very difficult, for here we are making the claim to be objective about ourselves. The question is: is it possible? Even more challenging is that we are asking ourselves to invert our ‘gaze’ towards our own “*assumptions, biases, and predispositions*” (Wisniewski 2000, 3).

In an effort to discern ethical issues that I may encounter during my research, I am reminded again by Nader (1972) to anticipate the same type of ethical problems whether one is studying up or studying down. This comment was in response to a question asked by one of her students:

“How can we gain access to the same kinds of information as when we ‘study down’ without being dishonest (i.e. a fake secretary or other role)? If we did get information without letting informants know we are social scientists, how could we publish it? It seems that the only ‘open’ way of doing a study would end up being fairly superficial—questionnaires and formal interviews versus what we learn by participant observation” (Nader 1972, 20).

Nader explains that this confusion points to an implicit double standard. I think that ethical consciousness and awareness is crucial in anthropological research. In the case of being denied access for any reason, I believe this would ultimately inform my research to help identify and analyze reasons of inaccessibility. In fact, it becomes even more imperative for the researcher to present findings openly and honestly as Morreira (2015) says, it may be liberating that the power dynamics “that are often unspoken can be spoken about” (Morreira 2015, 99).

Being a Muslim American, non-white graduate student and a woman researcher who was born in Pakistan and is researching Islam in higher education, places my positionality in today’s United States, in a rather sensitive position. This may impact my research in complex ways. There is a possibility that I may be perceived as an insider (being a Muslim) but may also come across as an outsider among Muslims. I say that as being a Shia Muslim I am a minority and being an Ismaili Shia Muslim, I am a minority within the minority. As I am interviewing professors teaching Islam, I might be perceived as an insider if the professor is from a different faith, or outsider if the professor is a Sunni Muslim. This may inadvertently impact my research either positively or negatively depending upon the disposition of the informant. I think that it is important to be self-reflexive and make every effort to avoid influencing the ethnographic research process.

Either way I believe that my positionality may in fact add value to the process of my goal of contributing to this very crucial and relevant discourse. Being aware of the implicit sensitivity at all ends, my aim is to aspire to have meaningful and reflective interaction with the participants with the goal of illuminating best practices intended to an enhanced, inclusive and intellectually engaging experience for both the student and the teacher.

### **2.3 Studying Up and the Challenge of Access**

To add to this complex mix is the issue of “studying up” which may be one of the causes contributing to the lack of academic research in higher education. Studying up refers to taking up research in your own society. Laura Nader (1972), in her article “*Up the Anthropologist: perspectives Gained From Studying Up*” urged anthropologists to study up, for it is incumbent upon them to contribute towards the understanding of how the power and responsibilities are practiced in America; in fact, she felt that there is a “certain urgency to this kind of anthropology” (Nader 1972, 1). Traditionally and historically, anthropological research has been more concerned with marginalized groups -- hence studying down -- however, recently there has been interest in studying up (Priyadarshini 2003, 420). One of the reasons for not casting the ethnographic gaze upon privileged or powerful sectors of our society could be that we think they do not have anything interesting to say (Anderson-Levy 2010, 182), but imagine if we were to study the colonizers instead of the colonized or study the powerful rather than the powerless; our questions might be quite different. Although we would still be asking many common-sense questions, they would be in reverse (Nader 1972, 5-6). Priyadharshini (2003) notices that

educational anthropologists are still focusing their ethnographic research upon marginalized groups for the purpose of studying cultures of privileged education and are reluctant and tend to avert their gazes away from studying-up or studying-in, such as, studying the behaviors and values of trustees, administrators or professors in higher education institutions. In an environment where “the fear is that political control of educational research and teaching in the name of ‘relevance’, ‘quality’, and ‘transparency’ may be producing conditions that stifle the quality and autonomy of research processes...it is becoming increasingly important to ‘study within’ academia, to understand the disciplining impetus of power on the practice of education and research” (Priyadharshini 2003, 420-421). Relating this concept to my research, Nader’s advice resonates with my goal of studying up as I aim to reach out to the professors and administrators to gain insight into their pedagogy and curriculum design. However, in my case I may be studying-in as well, for I am attempting to research within the academic institutions including the one of which I am a part.

Among some of the challenges that I anticipate and am apprehensive most about is that of access. Another obstacle that is common in studying up is about gatekeepers. Shannon Morreira (2015) in *Notes on gatekeepers and the production of knowledge in and about the postcolonial humanities*, points out some of the challenges encountered by her in her efforts to conduct ethnography “within.” Although the difficulty of access as projected by researchers sounds daunting, I am more inclined to agree with Nader that in a situation where access is tough and available methodology is limited, we must find an alternative. For example, if spending a long time interacting and conducting a conventional participant observation with the administrator or professor is inaccessible for any reason, the researcher can glean data through observation without participation (Nader 1972, 23).

### **3 ETHNOGRAPHIC FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

In this chapter, I present my research findings in a contextual and thematic format. The perspectives gained during my qualitative ethnographic in-depth interviews along with systematic on-line syllabi review, can be illustrated through three major themes: Religious Literacy, Anthropomorphization of Islam, and Approaches to Teaching Islam. This broad-based thematic categorization of my research findings is purely for the purpose of illuminating a contextualized and cohesive understanding of perspectives shared by scholars and teachers of Islamic Studies during the interviews.

#### **3.1 Religious Literacy**

During the course of this ethnographic research, not only did I try to look into, around and beyond the insights that my interviewees (expert collaborators) provided, I also made a sincere effort to reflect on my intention, purpose, and motivation that has and still is propelling me towards the subject of my research: the power of knowledge when applied contextually can be instrumental in providing a humanizing lens to understand religion as a unifier of humanity rather than a divider. However, religion is not always understood or presented as such. As my research focus was on Islamic Studies in higher education in the United States, I wanted to look at what are some of the major challenges, opportunities and approaches that are being practiced by educators who are engaged in teaching Islam in courses at Universities. The very first major theme that surfaced during my interviews was the concern about religious literacy. Religious literacy does not imply simply having knowledge about a religion, but rather it refers to the

ability to comprehend the significant role factors such as culture, tradition, political ideologies, gender roles, social status, poverty etc., play in shaping “what are overtly perceived as purely religious expressions” (Asani 2011, 1). Many educators, including Diane Moore (2014), and Ali S. Asani (2011), feel that it is a responsibility of our educational system to provide a critically engaging curriculum in the academic study of religion. A curriculum that has the potential to go beyond rites and ritual practices and enable students to acquire critical analytic skills to approach religion “as a cultural phenomenon” (Asani 2011, 2). At every level of education -- grade school, high school, and college -- students come across religion either through history, social studies, art, literature or world civilizations, but seldom are any teachers (especially at grade school and high school) professionally trained to teach religion. Therefore, the same students who approach religion in college, are not necessarily equipped with the ability to interpret religion in all its cultural dynamics, thus leading to the problem of religious and cultural illiteracy (Asani 2011,1-2).

The American Academy of Religion (AAR 2014) also defines a religiously literate person as one who has the capacity and ability to understand the social/political/cultural aspects of a religion as well as to understand the historical underpinnings, along with central texts, beliefs and practices of different world religions in their historical and contemporary manifestations. The emphasis on a contextual approach to religion points to the ineffectiveness and inadequacy of approaching learning about a religion merely through the study of its rites and practices or to learn only through “let’s see what scripture says” about a topic or a question, as this alone can only provide partial knowledge (Moore 2014, 380). During one of my

ethnographic interviews Professor Nisha <sup>1</sup> (pseudonym) posited that before delving into beliefs and practices of any religion it is imperative to understand what religion is first:

I would spend considerable time deconstructing what religion is first so that my students could avoid falling into essentializing Islam one way or another...deconstructing religion and how we think about it and how it changed over time. Seeing how fragile something like our concept of religion is to the forces of history and power...it gives students understanding that beliefs and practices are not directly extracted from a text as the guiding force of defining a religion but rather there is a historical and cultural context...they [beliefs and practices] are going to change over time and get taken up differently.

According to a report from the Task Force on General Education (2007) at Harvard University, we are faced with an enormous challenge of educating students about a world which is interconnected in an unprecedented way on one hand, but deeply divided on the other. This contemporary paradox of our time wherein people of different racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds have the ability to be in close contact with one another, and yet this proximity has not resulted in a positive outcome of better understanding, let alone appreciation of diversity, rather we are living in a world of increasing and ever-escalating inter-cultural and inter-national conflicts and tensions. Professor Diane Moore (2007), director of Harvard University's Program in Religion and Education points out the significance of religious literacy, particularly for the United States, which despite being one of the most religiously diverse countries, has a "population that is woefully ignorant about religion" (Moore 2007, 3; see also Asani 2011, 4).

There are two common symptoms of religious illiteracy. The first is the tendency to limit the understanding of a religion to its rites, rituals and devotional practices and the second is the inclination to associate actions of individuals, communities, and nations exclusively to a religion

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<sup>1</sup> Professor Nisha (a pseudonym) teaches in a university in Southeast USA. She has taught Islam courses to undergraduate and currently is teaching pre-services courses to future educators.

(Asani 2011, 4). In the case of Islam, these symptoms may be reflected in the perception that the faith of Islam is mainly responsible for the actions of anyone who calls him or herself a Muslim, or the assumption that whatever happens in a majority Muslim country is due to the faith of Islam. To a Muslim, such an explanation would be as absurd as associating high crime rates in the United States with its being a predominantly Christian nation. The point is that religious illiteracy inhibits one's ability to understand critically and often times leads people to forget that religion is fundamentally a human enterprise, in that although a believer may consider certain religious beliefs to be divinely revealed, the meanings and interpretations which they construct are always grounded in their worldly realities and circumstance and as such, religious illiteracy hinder one's ability to see beyond one's own biases and limitations to consider the possibility of a more nuanced, complex and more plausible explanation that is often rooted in social, economic, and political conditions. It also "hampers people from realizing that, while religion may be invoked as a legitimizer for certain human actions, the primary motivating forces are often rooted elsewhere" (Asani 2011, 4-5).

Religious literacy as a framework and a significant pedagogical tool for teaching Islam came up several times during my interviews (three out of seven of my interviewees made direct reference to it). I was referred to read about the RLP (Religious Literacy Project) initiated and headed by Diane Moore (2011) a professor at the Harvard School of Divinity, who in 2011 proposed the creation of this project to enhance public understanding of religion through education. According to the information provided on the RLP website, it is working on growing its resources for the general public as well as educators. What I found quite relevant to my findings and my argument is that this project attempts to make a clear distinction between the study of religion through its devotional expressions and the non-sectarian study of religion. This

project promotes the non-sectarian approach as the most appropriate for enhancing religious literacy. The three main assertions of the religious literacy project are:

1. Religions are internally diverse as opposed to uniform;
2. Religions evolve and change over time as opposed to being ahistorical and static;
3. Religious influences are embedded in all dimensions of culture as opposed to the assumption that religions function in discrete, isolated, “private” contexts. (Moore 2014, 381).

It is interesting to note that my findings closely resonate with the concept of religion being internally diverse, consisting of dynamic interpretive communities which are historically influenced while constantly influencing both private and public dimensions of societies in which they live. The truism of internal diversity within religion is a major factor which when ignored fosters a misconstrued, ahistorical and monolith narrative. Islam as a religion is no different than any other religion in the context of being internally diverse, historically dynamic, and traditionally interpretive. However, teaching Islamic Studies in a post-9/11 era is full of challenges and opportunities. The biggest challenge is to teach without letting only the horrific event of 9/11 define and control your narrative – for that would run the danger of being misconstrued and misinterpreted. The flip side could be to look at it as an opportunity; opportunity to critically analyze normative and essentialized representations of Islam by using a historical and cultural lens. During the research interviews that I conducted with professors affiliated with teaching religion, particularly Islam, certain matters were brought up by the interviewees: institutional set up and influence on the production of knowledge particularly in the Religious Studies Department at a university; the impact of packaging and housing of Islamic Studies in a university; the idea of staying neutral and avoiding theology at all costs; and the question of who should be teaching Islam ( the insider and outsider debate).

During one such interview, Professor Nisha shared some of her findings from her research as she thought it was relevant to my project. Talking about her research on Islam as taught in high school, she mentioned that she also conducted two sub-studies, one of which was to inquire into how teachers in high school approach their curriculum on Islam. She admitted that because she did not want to add a bad teacher narrative so prevalent in multicultural education, she chose a purposeful sampling on high school teachers who were teaching Islam in a variety of classes to ask them what their considerations were? Interestingly seven out of eight of those teachers talked about teaching against Islamophobia as sort of their goal. She said:

So, they would assign projects and find readings to supplement their text books that would really make that note. So some of them for example, would start the unit with an activity where they would say okay tell me all the stereotypes you have heard about Islam and Muslims and then they would sort of use that as sort of a map to try and debunk the stereotype and they would want to get the message across many of them that look at Islam as the religion of peace and what was so interesting is that they were almost on this mission that you know to make Islam look a certain way but they were not using a cultural approach where they focused on the adherents but they really took Islam as something codified...as if you can say...it is good or it is bad or it is peaceful or it is violent. So, they were not very critical of that and they were not teaching it from a cultural studies perspective...they very much were still within that box of belief and practices.

In the above quote, Professor Nisha critiques those teachers' tendency to treat and present Islam as something codified, as something with agency rather than adherents. So, if those teachers were to use a cultural approach, they would be approaching Islam through the lived experiences of its adherents. Based on her comment, then, are we to conclude that a critical approach would imply a neutral position? A teacher who can distance him or herself from taking any position? This is certainly what seems to be required of Religious Studies departments in a secular system. However, one must be careful not to go completely the other way as professor Nisha found an example through interviewing another teacher who claimed neutrality. She says:

Then there was another teacher who claimed to be very neutral in his teaching so he does not like to take a stand one-way or another and ended up saying that he was teaching contemporary world issues class where Islam would come up, you know, through the topics in class and one of his issues was access to water and women's civil rights around the world...umm..and he said something like, well you know Islam won't end up looking very good. So, his role as someone just sort of objective and a conduit of information but necessarily as anyone who is interpreting the information Islam has to be in that way. It is not going to end up looking good, but he has nothing to do with that. So that was really in contrast to the other teachers who were on this mission like jihad against Islamophobia. They were really determined. So, either way, when using the religious literacy framework that's developed by Asani and Moore, it was really clear to me that teachers rely on notions of Islam that is something fixed and they continue to rely on that rather than seeing it as a lived experience that can be many things to many people.

Professor Richard<sup>2</sup> another expert collaborator interviewee for my project shared somewhat similar concerns and experiences. He says:

In the post-9/11 world there is a profound temptation to be an apologist for Islam. All the things we hear every day -you know- 'that's not true Islam' 'true Islam is peaceful' etc. I am not here to say it is the greatest religion ever or the worst, I am here to teach it critically like I would any other. So, sort of the interpretive vices to avoid are being an unreflective critic of religion or an unreflective apologist for the religion. Like you have to thread the needle somewhere in between those two temptations.

### **3.2 Anthropomorphization of Islam and Other Challenges**

In an effort to define and describe Islam within the western context, a strong bent towards normalization of a singular, monotheistic and essentialized narrative is generally pitted against the reality of internal diversity which is often looked at as an add-on to the authentic and

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<sup>2</sup> Professor Richard is currently teaching Anthropology of religion in a public university in the Southeast USA. His background is in Philosophy and Religious Ethics. He has taught Islam previously at a Protestant seminary and a private university in the United States.

universal 'Islam'. Since Islamic Studies as an academic subject is tied to the field of Religious Studies in most institutions, its structure is linked to the structure of the Study of Religion (Rashid 2018, 88). The pre-Christian etymology for the word religion traces back to the Latin *relegere*, which means 'to re-read' or 'to re-trace' hence, appropriate and possible synonymous with existing traditions of that time. However, later on around the third century of common era, a new etymology was provided by Christian authors which refers to religion as related to *religare*, which means 'to bind or to tie together' making the assertion that there is only one true religion which binds the followers together through the worship of one true God and all other type of worships are mere superstition (Rashid 2018, 88; King 1999, 35). This shift points to the establishment of Christianity's monotheism as the normative model that defined the category of religion. Thus, the category of religion is indexed to this exclusive paradigm of Christianity as to what the idea of religion could be (Rashid 2018; King 1999). When the academic study of religion based on theological foundation where theology assumed Christianity as a dominant religion entered into a secular period requiring separation of the State and Religion, efforts to prevent emic notions and understanding of worshipers and to prove its objectivity as a discipline distinct from Theology, the Study of Religion may have inadvertently replaced theology with a nation-state narrative (Rashid 2018, 89). As Religious Studies in secular institutions strove to become more objective, their investment in traditions began to lose footing and their reliance on inquiry based on static and normative truths became a common practice (Rashid 2018, 89). A lack of traditional context in the study of religion is problematic as it is the diversity of traditions that allows for a deeper understanding of why an adherent believes what he or she believes and provides a more dynamic understanding of a given religion (Rashid 2018, 89). Talking about Theology as an approach to teach religion, the majority of my interviewees set out to explain to

me that in public institutions of higher studies in the United States as a secular state, you are to avoid using Theology in your curriculum. Only private institutes or universities and religiously affiliated university have the liberty to teach Theology. Talking about Theology and secularism in institutions of higher education Professor Richard explained:

Another issue that is hotly contested is the relationship between Theology and Religious Studies. And I think all you can say is that there is a wide spectrum of attitudes concerning the relationship. I think the line is blurry ...and I think it is importantly blurry. And I certainly think that teaching Theology is not the same as training people theologically. You can't think you can be a good student of a religious tradition if you don't know the theology of that tradition. And I think what happens is some practitioners of comparative religion are so allergic about theology and they feel so committed to policing the boundaries that anything that even smells like theology they feel they have to keep it out of the room.

Later in the conversation, talking about secularism Professor Richard said:

So, there is a minimalist version of secularism and then there is a maximalist version of secularism. The maximalist version of secularism really is a theory of secularization, this sort of old-style sociology that argued back in the 60's that religion is going away, that the nature of modernity actually eviscerates religion and as societies get more modernized they become secular in the sense of almost anti-religious. For anybody who had the grand narrative about religion and the modern world, 1979 came as kind of a shock. The Moral Majority in United States, the Iranian revolution, and you started hearing things like Whoa, religion is back! Well, it is not back, it never went away. You just weren't seeing it. You convinced yourselves of the secularization narrative. What you mean by secular politics is nothing more than how you accommodate religious pluralism.

What Professor Richard was trying to relay to me during our interview was that it is very important to understand perspectives in which religion's place in a secular state gets determined. This also raise questions regarding the role and impact that socio-political institutions play in the production of knowledge on religion and inversely, the role that religion plays (either implicitly or explicitly) on socio-political institutions in a secular state. Although there are clear rules in the United States regarding the separation of state and religion, this does not prevent religiously inspired nationalistic ideologies from implicitly entering the government policies. Asad (2008)

gives an example of the Christian Right being at the center of the Bush government; in it being an “anti-Semitic ally of the Zionist organizations in America, and its political imagination embrace[d] the war against Iraq and Afghanistan as a step towards Armageddon. ‘A secular war’ [was] supported by them for ‘religious reasons’” (Asad 2008, 28). This is not to criticize or show disapproval for the Christian Right, but rather to point out the fact that a “secular state can without difficulty accommodate such politics” (Asad 2008, 28). Inversely, the production of religious knowledge in a secular state gets impacted by state policies. The process of secularization is not as clear-cut, fixed or a unitary entity of a model as is often implied in our Western societies. For instance, in France, the state and the society are both secular. In the United States, the society is relatively quite religious but the state claims to be secular, whereas there is an established religion in England, but the society is very secular. Therefore, there are different sensibilities and reactions of people towards what is considered secular. For instance, in the debate in France against allowing Muslim girls to wear veil in public school is viewed differently than wearing a yarmulke by Jewish boys. What is it that makes wearing one’s religious symbol in public space ok and the other not? (Asad 2008, 28). This is a clear example of both cognitive dissonance and underlying xenophobia as well as racism that affects policy decisions.

It appears that, in any model of secularism, the state and the religion may not be as separate as one would assume. For my inquiry into the academic study of Islam in the United States, the relationship between principles and concepts of secularism was one of the determinant variables impacting curriculum consideration and became significant as I started to reflect and analyze views shared by some of my interviewees. My purpose for engaging in the discourse

about the basis and the structure of the Study of Religion is to illuminate the implicit error in approaching the study of Islam as an anthropomorphic entity.

The anthropomorphization of Islam can also be referred to as personification of Islam. When media or anyone for that matter describe any action of an individual by referring it to be Islamic or articulations such as Islamic terrorism implies a new role and agency to the religion itself rather than to its adherents. Hussein Rashid explains the issue of Anthropomorphization of Islam quite succinctly:

If Islam is anthropomorphized, then it can be discussed as a unitary object, removing any sense of agency from adherents of Islam. Muslims are effaced from the narrative of this Islam. There are two mechanisms through which this effacement happens. The first mechanism is scripturalism, which emerges out of Protestant notion of the primacy of scripture<sup>3</sup>. As it applies to Muslims, it is the belief that verses of scripture control the actions of Muslims, although there is no concordant belief that scripture is predictive of the behavior of Protestants themselves. The second mechanism is culture talk<sup>4</sup>. This idea extends beyond Muslims to other minority groups in America<sup>5</sup>, and seems to be tied to the ways religions were described as part of colonial projects.<sup>6</sup> Cultural talks reduces complex traditions to an essence that explains the politics of a cultural matrix. Both mechanisms seek to exert control over Muslim communities by claiming to have a predictive element to their understanding of Islam (Rashid 2018, 90)

Edward Said's observation regarding knowledge production, especially when it relates to the teaching of Islam, also points to agendas of domination such that knowledge is used as a tool to craft social and political realities (Said 1979; Said 1981). A common unstated assumption that the "proper name 'Islam' denotes a simple thing to which one refer immediately, as one refers to

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<sup>3</sup> Rashid references Carl W. Ernst "Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World" 2003. Page 55.

<sup>4</sup> Rashid has referenced Mahmood Mamdani's "Good Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror" 2004. 17-62; A. Kevin Reinhart, "On the "Introduction to Islam"," in Teaching Islam, ed. Brannon M. Wheeler, 2004. 24. On "phenomenal essentialism.

<sup>5</sup> Rashid refers to: cf. Richard C. Martin, and Abbas Barzegar, "Formations of Orthodoxy: Authority, Power, and Networks in Muslim Societies, in Rethinking Islamic Studies: From Orientalism to Cosmopolitanism.

<sup>6</sup> Rashid refers to Hastings Donnan, and Martin Stokes "Interpreting Interpretations of Islam" in Interpreting Islam, ed. Hastings Donnan. 2002

‘democracy’, or to a person, or to an institution like the Catholic Church” (Said 1981; 1997, 40-41) is inaccurate and misleading. So, the problem of the anthropomorphization of Islam is not merely the transference of all agency from an adherent to the faith itself, but the issue is also that it is linked with the ideology of an essentialized and normalized version of Islam that produces homogenized adherents called Muslims. Hence when such a construction of “Islam” when linked to the academic study of Islam within the structure of the Study of Religion in the United States, finds itself in a precarious, yet significant position to approach and teach Islam in keeping with its internal diversity while avoiding the essentialized oriental framework and that too without engaging in theological discourses. As discussed earlier in my literature review, Talal Asad’s theoretical framework of approaching Islam as a “discursive tradition” might be useful as an alternative approach to avoid falling into the trap of an objectified or essentialized or anthropomorphized Islam.

For professors teaching Islamic studies in a post-9/11 United States, the challenge of not letting the 9/11 narrative along with the politically charged media-centered biases take over their curricular framework has become much more difficult and often unavoidable (for both, theological and non-theological approaches). The following quotes from my interviewees reflect such concerns:

Professor Richard:

So, I designed my course when I took a job at an -----, incredibly liberal Protestant seminary. So, the 9/11 attacks had happened just a couple of months before I went out for my campus interview, and because it was on my mind, one of the things I talked about with faculty was how has it impacted that classroom, because if you are teaching religion in any way, it’s been in there. And in the course of talking about that a number of people said, I just—it is in there and everybody wants to talk about it in my classes but nobody knows anything about Islam and we are Protestant Seminary and I mean there is no reason we should and when I was offered the job I said, know, I am still thinking about that and I was being hired to do their Ethics curriculum so Christian Ethics

was part of it and so was Philosophical Ethics and I do them both in a fairly historical way...So, I designed a course and in retrospect, I see how problematic that is—called “Islam and the Modern West”. Now I talked about Islam as a thing and the thing that I held it up against was not another religion, but it was the Modern West. But of course, what I was trying to get at in the title is that’s how the 9/11 attacks are being framed; as a fight between Islam and the Modern West or Islam’s resentful politics vis-à-vis the colonizing west. So, I knew why I was doing it, but I was not yet—because I had never done it before in my old course design, I was thinking about how to situate the current conflict but I unwittingly was letting the current conflict drive the whole course, when in fact the purpose of the course was precisely not to let the 9/11 attacks define the field of Islamic Studies now.

Professor Richard’s reflective analysis and his critical approach towards teaching Islam is what is needed and should be aspired to in order to understand the complex and nuanced network of multiple factors (historical, social, political, etc.,) that plays a role in how an adherent (as an individual or as an interpretive community) interprets and practices religion. Another interviewee stated her concerns as follows:

Professor Valerie<sup>7</sup>:

I didn’t know a lot about it [Islam] and so I really fell in love with the early history specifically Islamic Spain. Love that history and so I was learning more more more and when I began to teach my own classes, I began to see a lot of kind of misconceptions due to media especially earlier. This generation is really looking at media less and less but with that they’re clicking on so many things [online] that there are all these terms still that they are misconceiving again and so, they think they know what a word like Jihad means but really they don’t understand all of the biases and the perspective that specifically Western, that is specifically political and that sometimes religion---it is being pitched as specifically religious—just oh this is Islamic you know but it’s more cultural or Arabic or something else and to kind of understand the complexity of it and to try to get people to understand that and then to watch my Muslim students feel seen after those conversations...And I think so many people don’t want to admit the misconceptions that they have in general, but especially after you know, with the Islamophobia’s rise... its more the norm to have a misconception than to have looked into a culture that you’re unfamiliar with and so like that’s a harsh starting place to begin. It is an unfortunate one, but it is already one.

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<sup>7</sup> Professor Valerie (pseudonym) is currently teaching Islam at a public university in the Southeast U.S.A. She has two masters and is teaching courses in World Religion.

Professor Richard:

I had a teacher who primarily taught medieval Judaism, really smart guy and I was sitting in a faculty lounge with him one day and he got his mail and he says look at this. And it was some press had sent him a new list of books in Jewish Studies and everyone [of those books] was something having to do with the Holocaust and he just looked at me. He said, they win when we act as if this is the only thing that happened in Jewish history... We shouldn't let the field be forced to own this as part of their subject matter and I came to that thinking all over again after 9/11. Is this something we should saddle Islamic studies with?

Other significant findings reflecting some of the concerns, challenges, considerations, approaches and practices in teaching Islamic studies also include perspectives (of professors) on matters of institutional limitations and the role of packaging in knowledge production and who should teach Islamic Studies, an insider or an outsider.

Regarding the role of the institution in enabling knowledge production, especially with regards to Islamic Studies, more than one of my interviewees brought up (either directly or indirectly) the significance and impact of where the Study of Islam gets located within institutions of higher learnings. Professor Richard pointed out the issue of dispersed knowledge due to the shift in the older model of a university to the contemporary model that is more of a multiversity. In such a setup, collaborative knowledge production has become quite difficult and time-consuming. He says:

Professor Richard:

Islamic Studies was housed in the Religious Studies department here and there is some inter-disciplinary work hosted by the Center of Middle Eastern Studies... Islamic Studies... is dispersed. At [another] university where he used to teach --- it is also dispersed. Something in the Law School, something in Middle East and South Asian Studies, something in Religion [department of Religious Studies], and that maybe worth thinking about. How and where things are housed. It is part of how they are packaged, and that packaging sometimes is contributory to the way knowledge is produced. Sometimes it is just a practical matter and sometimes in a big university where the critics say now that we are not a university, we are multiversity, where nobody over here knows what the

people over there are doing, even if they are both working on the same topic. That is a fact. So, Islamic Studies' dispersion in a modern multiversity also can lead to redundancies or the loss of an opportunity for collaborative work that doesn't get done because there is no integrating space.

When I asked Professor Richard who, in his opinion, should be responsible for initiating this collaboration, his answer began with "it depends" – he then went on to describe practical issues of collaboration as it would involve having a road map of the institution along with the knowledge of all the key players which is a huge problem in the modern multiversity. What I gauged from his answer was that there is currently no one in the administration of his institution who has a defined role as an enabler, hence, remains a limiting issue. This quote also illuminates the limitations of a department of Religious Studies in being a nexus for Islamic Studies.

Another dimension of knowledge production that gets impacted by what Professor Richard aptly called an institutional packaging issue, is how something is taught. There is difference in learning about Islam through a week-long discussion in a World Religion course, versus a semester-long course on Islam. These courses are often taught by graduate students of Religious Studies and I learned from two of my interviewees that they were not necessarily trained in Islamic Studies but rather in Religious Studies. To illustrate the following is part of a conversation I had with a teacher who is currently teaching World Religion and has also taught Introduction to Islam in previous semesters. When asked about difference in teaching World Religion and the Introduction to Islam class Professor Catherine<sup>8</sup> said:

Yes, definitely a difference. The Intro. Class is a survey course, so it has a ton of information over a semester. The World Religion, I think we talk about Islam maybe two or three times in the semester. Very small. And it is usually just a – I think I added some background information to what I was given when I started teaching it. I added some context stuff – just like more information about the biography of Muhammad, some historical context of what was going on at the time just to give it a little more depth, like political realities of seventh century

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<sup>8</sup> Professor Catherine is teaching courses on World Religion and Introduction to Islam in a public university in the Southeast USA. She has her undergraduate in Anthropology and a master's in religious studies.

Arabia which I think helps to understand how this particular tradition came to be the way that it did. That's kind of the extent of it in the World Religion's class they don't hit too much into other topics we talk about...I am still teaching four times this semester. It is a thematic class, so we talk about rituals for a couple of weeks and then we talk about...I don't know...violence or evil or something else for a couple of weeks. Just the way the class is structured is different than a regular survey course. I am trying to think of places where Islam comes up. So, we talk about creation stories. We talk about Jihad briefly.

To give credence to Professor Richard's conviction that World Religion courses, despite being criticized a bit to the extreme, are better than nothing, seems reasonable; however, this does not make me feel any better or less concerned. While he admits the fact that it is impossible to learn about a religion what you don't know in one week, he pointed out the significance of not treating religion as a petting zoo. My personal experience of attending a World Religion course during my undergrad semester, unfortunately, left much to be desired. The class was taught by a graduate student from the department of Religion. The reading material included elements from different faiths including Islam; however, the sense of disjuncture (at least for me) was frustratingly palpable. The material was presented in such a superficial manner that it felt like a mere information transference. I think it depends on who is teaching the class. My critique does not necessarily imply that World Religion class must not be taught by a Religious study graduate student, but rather that there should be training provided (more than the binder with lesson plan materials on topics to be taught) to enable these instructors to effectively contextualize knowledge.

To further add to the list of issues impacting the teaching of Islamic Studies, is the question of whether one should be what one teaches? There is a tendency to hire an Islamicist who is also a practicing Muslim. However, there also exists an alternative view suggesting that it may be better for the teacher of Islamic studies to be a non-Muslim so as to retain objectivity. It also prevents professor from limiting his instruction to his own traditions. Upon inquiring his

views on the matter Professor Richard stressed the importance of training over what one's practice of faith is:

Because, being a self-identifying member of a religious tradition does not authorize you in any way. It certainly doesn't incline me to believe that you will be critical. And what matters is the training in the comparative religion...it is often a case that rubbing one religious tradition up against another, you notice features of both that you wouldn't have seen that way if you were just looking at one tradition. So, I feel two ways about it. So, I am not saying that being a practicing member of a religious tradition disqualifies you, I am saying that it doesn't automatically qualifies you.

On the flip side, he said, being a Muslim scholar in department of Religion who is also trained tend to provide "authenticity and authority by location." Moreover, pedagogically it also provides credibility in the eyes of students. When asked the same question Professor Nisha responded:

Well we know that objectivity doesn't exist so throwing that out the window, I would say that absolutely a Muslim can teach. I also really believe in leveraging vulnerability as a pedagogical tool. So, as long as the Muslim professor is reflective about their traditions just like you would be in an academic article, right? About what places are too close for them, speaking from their own experience, those things can be leveraged as they strengthen the classroom as long as they also are academic enough whether they are Muslims or not to understand that there are diverse approaches and that you have a responsibility of providing depth and keeping up with current scholarships. So, that should be your threshold and check because there are professors I know, and I have experienced who are not Muslims and who are not keeping up with the best of what's a religious study is and they are teaching in ways that are really threatening and really simplistic and essentialist.

Both, Professor Richard and Professor Nisha strongly conveyed to me that just being a Muslim does not give one the credentials to teach Islam. Professor Nisha went on to share an incident to bring her point home:

For example, somebody that I used to work with at my previous institution, he is not a religious scholar, but he is political science person, but he is Muslim, and I am Muslim, and we were the only two at the University. He did a workshop for K-12 teachers on Islam where he stressed the five pillars and basically beliefs and practices and then had invited me to speak on my work which I don't think he

read in advance. So, when I showed up I tore apart his methodology without knowing. That's how I prepared, you know. So, but he very much is like we have to go bare minimum with people because they don't know better and my...I don't think I have the right to teach what Islam is and I don't think he has the right because we are not experts in the field...Having rigorous academic study and understanding the interdisciplinary nature and depth, rigor and nuance with which people take up religion and what religion actually is from a scholarly perspective is what you need, Muslim or not. So, assuming that you are trained you can separate yourself.

### **3.3 Contextual, Cultural, and Critical Approaches to Teaching Islam**

Diane Moore (2014) advocates a cultural studies approach to understanding religion. This is based on the assumptions that: religions are internally diverse, not uniform; religions evolve and change, rather than being ahistorical or static; religions influence all aspects of culture. Moore proposes a culturally contextualized model for teaching Islam academically. First, this method must be inter-disciplinary so as to recognize that social, political, economic, and cultural dimensions are intertwined rather than being discreet. For instance, political or economic circumstances condition human experiences and induce particular actions and motivations that cannot be accurately or effectively understood without understanding one's religious and cultural ideologies and vice versa. Second, Moore's cultural methodology argues that all knowledge claims are "situated" such that they emerge out of specific socio-political and historical contexts and therefore must be treated as particular knowledge claims rather than as universal ones. Most importantly her claim of "situated" knowledge endeavors to distance itself from relativism. As relativism suggests all claims and interpretation equally valid. Whereas, a situated knowledge-claim "offers the firm ground upon which to make objective claims that are defined not by their detachment but rather by their specificity, transparency, and capacity for accountability" (Moore

2014, 384). Third, the notion of situatedness should also apply to the text or material that is being investigated, including the scholarly interpretation that is being used during learning as it is crucial to understand and remember that “all forms of inquiry and interpretations [are] filtered through particular lenses. By acknowledging this fact, an essential dimension of the inquiry itself is to identify those differing lenses and make transparent that which would otherwise be hidden” (Moore 2014, 384).

This is where I think Talal Asad’s (1986) rejection of Abdul Hamid Al-Zein’s (1979) argument that all forms of Islam must be treated as the true form of Islam, can be addressed. If all knowledge claims are situated, then Asad’s discursive traditions theory can actually work towards understanding internal diversity of Islam without normalizing an essentialist true “Islam” (anthropomorphized and objectified). As long as there is transparency and accountability that follows a given interpretation’s contextual situatedness, critical learning and teaching of Islam sounds really promising. Hussein Rashid (2018) suggests that the core issue with regard to the methodology of teaching Islamic Studies must be that it “allows us to look for other narratives of being Muslim...it is possible to recognize a multitude of Muslim practices, organized under a logic of “Islam,” but conditioned by lived realities of practitioners...It is a problem of the modern to see and expect homogeneity in traditions. It seems to be an anachronistic reading tied to notions of control” (Rashid 2018, 92)

Fourth, in the endeavor of knowledge production in Islam through a cultural approach, is the call for an “analysis of power and powerlessness” (Moore 2014, 384). It is crucial to critically inquire as to why some interpretations are more prominent than others. What conditions (social, political, and historical) and contexts have led to the normalization of a certain tradition of interpretation over others. Cultural Studies approaches, argues Simon During (2005), are

about engaging in an analysis of contemporary cultures and the engagement is linked to three distinct dimensions: first is the scholar's critical engagement with those who suffer under social and political structure; second, is the engagement with the intent to enhance and celebrate social experiences by analyzing its underlying elements; and the third dimension is the engagement with culture as a lived experience (King 2005, 53; Rashid 2018, 92).

Teaching Islam academically in a Cultural Studies context would require a teacher to speak to the breadth of Muslim diversity in the world and to do that in a single college/university 14-week (on average) semester is next to impossible. Hence, there are pedagogical choices that are made by professors regarding what to include in an "Introduction to Islam" class. The worry is that it often happens in such a way that it creates a normalized version of Islam against which other Muslims are measured (Rashid 2018, 93). Therefore, Asani (2011) suggests that the most effective way to teach Islamic Studies academically is through the "contextual approach" out of the other two approaches that of the "textual approach" and the "devotional approach."

The "devotional approach" is what is used and associated most commonly with the idea of religion. It represents religious tradition primarily through its "doctrines, rituals and practices" (Asani 2011, 8). This approach often tends to present the world's religions in monolithic terms without engaging their existing interpretive diversity. For example, wearing the of hijab would often be presented as a religiously mandated practice for all Muslim women, whereas there have been vigorous debates amongst Muslim scholars regarding its theological basis as to whether it is even Islamic in origin (Asani 2011, 8-9). The "textual approach" by itself can be problematic as well. "Textual approaches" regard the sacred writings and texts of a given religion as the authoritative embodiment of its traditions. The idea is that a religion is best understood through its scriptures. However, reading a sacred text – for instance, the translated Quran (with

translator's own ideological biases – since we have already established a diversity of interpretation exists inter-Islam) – without its historical and socio-cultural context can lead to a misconstrued, or misperceived understanding (as can be heard and seen in media after 9/11). A more serious problem with this approach is that it can lead to a very restrictive understanding of religion – for, religious texts “do not have meaning in and of themselves; they are only given meaning by believers who revere, venerate, and consider them authoritative” (Asani 2011, 10). It is the communities of believers who interpret these texts within various contexts in which they live. The contextual approach is most effective in teaching Islamic Studies, keeping in mind the cognizance and significance of “relating expressions and interpretations of religion to a complex web of many nontheological factors” (Asani 2011, 11). This methodology also accommodates our need for critical studies in religion, as paying close attention to the varied contexts of interpretation enables a better understanding of how a religious practice can be related and practiced in contradictory ways. Critical approach can also challenge a dominant narrative with alternative narrative addressing internal diversity in Islam. Rashid (2018) argues that Islamic Studies' reliance on Arabic and legalistic texts appear to favor reading mostly Sunni tradition, thus rendering it as the normative Islam to which other traditions are compared. This approach of rendering one tradition as an orthodoxy and the other as heterodoxy or even heresy harkens back to the Orientalist categories of control where European scholars “favorably compared Sunni communities to Protestant communities and established Sunnism as the Muslim orthodoxy” (Rashid 2018, 94), Whereas the Shia tradition was looked at as the heterodox add-on. As delving into the influences and conditioning of theological structures between Christianity and Islam is beyond the scope of this project, I simply wanted to bring home the point that Islamic Studies as taught in introductory courses in most secular universities often inadvertently follow a normative

Sunni tradition leading to a narrow and singular narrative without accounting for the inherent diversity that exists within Islam. During one of my interviews with an instructor who is currently teaching courses on “World Religion” as well as “Introduction to Islam,” she said this while talking about addressing diversity in Islam in her curriculum:

Question: Does diversity within Islam comes up?

Professor Catherine: It comes up. It came up in the Islam class because I got to spend more time on the difference between Sunni and Shia. But we didn’t talk much about the ethnic diversity. We talked more about the theological diversity – like we went over different schools of thought [Sunni Schools of thought? I asked]. Yeh, I know more about Sunni Islam, so we probably spent more time there. But I tried to cover some of how Shi’ism came to be and what it looks like in the modern day.

It is also important to note that who is teaching also makes a large difference, as discussed earlier in this thesis. This instructor is not a Muslim, and if her position is neutral, then wouldn’t a critical approach demand a deeper dive into diversity? We might compare this to a couple of other responses from some of my other interviewees who are teaching about Islam but in other departments (Education and Gender Studies). Both are Muslims, and this is what they said about how they approach Islam:

Professor Shehnoor<sup>9</sup>:

I taught as a visiting professor [in the Northeast USA]. That was the Islam Course that I taught...My other courses invoked Islam and Muslims indirectly because I do courses on girlhood, feminist theory, gender, race, and class and so it is always there this like modules around Muslim women but I think the Islam course the Intro to Islam – I think that was the time when actually I reflected on the fact that being a Shia – of course my syllabus had to also reflect Shia actually a legitimate sort of interpretive authority that has its grounding earlier on in the formation of religion as opposed to something that emerges later on...so I would do different articles and I would try to bring in different approaches and

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<sup>9</sup> Professor Shehnoor (pseudonym) is currently teaching Gender studies at a private liberal arts University in the United States. She has a doctorate in Gender and Education. She has previously taught introduction to Islam classes for a few years in the Northeast USA

writings... so that one interpretation of one narrative would also be countered in some way by another narrative too so that is something I did for that course.

If I were to look at the above two quotes critically, both these teachers are applying a somewhat theoretically oriented context but with a non-theological pedagogy. What is interesting to note is that the teacher who self-identified as a practicing Shia Muslim appears to be consciously trying to include diverse and multiple narratives. This reminds me of what Professor Nisha said earlier about how being a Muslim may be beneficial in teaching Islamic Studies if the teacher is well trained and is able to be reflective about her own tradition.

While we are on the topic of cultural and critical approaches to teaching Islamic Studies, I include a few more quotes from my interviewees that can provide a brief glimpse into some of the approaches that are being utilized. They were relayed to me as best practices. It is interesting to note that they all vary in their perception of what they consider to be best practices and their contexts also differ in range from anti-Islamophobic, theologically-oriented, rituals-and-practices-focused, to critical and cultural:

Professor Nisha:

I have brought Islam into my classroom through lived experiences of Muslims. So for example, I taught a class in my old university where the course was a special topic some adaptable course to any like specific issue or focus and that was called critical diversity studies of particular sort of focus that I had was looking at anti-blackness and Islamophobia and again this was an Education course but was open to undergraduates of all majors and so I was able to bring in all cultural text, so I was able to really bring my point out that... Islam is something that is taken up in different ways. Like I assigned for example a podcast episode from the podcast Good Muslim Bad Muslim where two different young women are talking about their love and sex life and I had student's reaction of surprise that Muslim women are talking about their love and sex life and I had students' reactions of surprise.

Professor Valerie:

So, I often go with Talal Asad's definition where he is like – we can't – like there is no such thing – that is an isolated like Islam is that thing, so, when people stop doing it, it stops existing. So, all we can study is not – right? Not trying to get to this original source of what this thing is but rather, what is it that people are doing in its name and all its complexities...It [the classroom] is the space to think differently and so rather than concepts and that is how I try to teach my classes, rather than memorizing concepts...materials, think differently. Ask a question. It is ok to ask a question that initially comes to your mind but think differently ask a different question...so the material starts to look different when you start to come to it with different questions because often your initial question or questions are due to bias right? So, someone will ask something [and I would ask] so why that something is uncomfortable for you? ... So, thinking through all of those aspects rather than just giving someone material.

Professor Shehnoor:

I think what tends to happen in the U.S. is that a lot of people, a lot of at least my students, would ask me about 5 Pillars because that's what they kind of want to know and think and I think the subject position of the professor informs how they frame the curriculum but also where to push back and so I used to push back around thinking about 5 Pillars as something that is fundamental to Islam or is the primary angle and is through which you can understand religion and so I think in an American context where people are looking for these knowledge-bytes in order to just understand what Islam is, the 5 Pillars is very provocative. It is easily digestible and it is used a lot and so I think for a more sort of complex study of Islam then you have to push back around certain spaces just as you push back around the imagination of Muslim women as the perennial victim; similar to that I also had to push back against this sort of general knowledge about Islam through 5 Pillars and that opens up ways to think about interpretive communities.

The tendency to approach Islamic studies especially within courses such as World Religion and Introduction to Islam, through its basic ritual is still a first-go-to temptation amongst both teachers and students of Islamic Studies. Learning about a religion through its rites and practices is not problematic in itself, as long as it is not portrayed as '*the rites and practices.*' The awareness of this limitation was communicated to me during an interview by Professor Hashim<sup>10</sup>. He explained that for a critical and cultural approach a subtle shift in language and

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<sup>10</sup> Professor Hashim is teaching courses on Islam in a private university in the Northeast USA. He has a master's degree in theology focusing on Islam and a doctorate in near-eastern languages and cultures.

focus makes a huge difference in opening new paradigms of understanding. For example, he said that while talking about Hajj, he begins by talking about pilgrimage as a concept where Hajj is the model but Konya (birth place of Sufi master Mevlana Rumi), Karbala (location where the battle of Karbala took place) are also places where many Muslims go for pilgrimage activity as well.

Besides best practices as shared by interviewees regarding teaching Islamic Studies, there are some constraints and limitations that surfaced during the process of my research. As mentioned earlier, knowledge production on Islam gets impacted by lack of collaboration between department of Religious Studies and other area studies, for they too cover Islam. Teaching Islam by a non-specialist may result in a narrow and simplified understanding as compared to a critical, cultural, non-anthropomorphized, and contextual knowledge production. Furthermore, it is easy to confuse internal diversity within Islam due to a focus on the dominant narrative and limit diversity exploration to a single version. For instance, while looking at one of syllabus that is used by one of my interviewees to teach an Islam class included an assignment called site-visit. Students are to visit two local mosques and write about the differences in its architectures, demographics, memberships, rituals, theology, themes of services etc. What struck my attention was the assumption that mosques are a single model representative of Muslims' house of worship. For a critical and cultural approach, it might be beneficial to visit not only mosques but also add different places such as, Imambara (Shia mosque), Khanaqah (Place used by Sufis) etc.

## 4 CONCLUSION

Through this project my intention was to inquire into the considerations and the approaches that are utilized in the teaching of Islamic Studies at institutions of higher education. Since most universities in the United States offer courses on Islam in a world religion context as well as through Introduction to Islam courses, I wanted to explore how Islam is being taught in secular universities. What are some of the considerations in curriculum design? How do they decide what to include and what to exclude? Is the diversity within Islam being addressed? What are some of the best practices and challenges from the teacher's point of view? These were some of the basic questions with which I set out on this challenging journey. I say challenging, for, very early on in the project, I realized how difficult it was to recruit a professor to take some time out to give you an ethnographic interview. Initially, my research design included ethnographic interviews with professors from multiple universities who are teaching courses on Islam at an undergraduate level along with an anonymous student survey to be conducted in the class rooms where I would also engage in participant observation with the instructor's permission. Unfortunately, IRB procedure took a bit longer than expected and was unable to approve participant observation prior to the approval from department's head. Suffice it to say that, due to time limitations, I decided to focus on teachers' perspectives, rather than looking at both teachers and students. In retrospect, this turned out to be a wise decision, for it allowed me to conduct more focused and in-depth research.

As a practicing Muslim, I have stayed continuously concerned throughout my research project about my personal biases and subjective opinions. I realized that as I was processing and

analyzing my interviewee professors' responses, I was also simultaneously attempting to reflect on how I feel about that – it was quite intense.

It is a known fact that in a post-9/11 United States, Islam is talked about more than ever before, everywhere and in every way. Islamophobia appears to be a latest addition to the list of other social diseases such as racism, homophobia, xenophobia and many others. It is not that Islam or Muslims are new to the west in general or the United States in particular; however the intensity of 'otherness' resulting from a complex web of political, economic, and nationalistic agendas that are being built on false and ignorant assumptions are creating a misconstrued smoke screen that seems to dehumanize the Muslim "other." In such an environment, significance of institutions of higher education increases as a site where credible knowledge about Islam is expected.

Based on the findings from ethnographic interviews, I have endeavored to present these findings through three thematic categories: Religious Literacy; Anthropomorphization of Islam; and Approaches to Teaching Islam. This broad-based thematic categorization of my research findings is purely for the purpose of illuminating a contextualized and cohesive understanding of perspectives shared by scholars and teachers of Islamic Studies during the interviews.

My findings confirm awareness amongst educators (at least the ones that I interviewed) regarding the significance of religious literacy. The American Academy of Religion (AAR 2014) defines a religiously literate person to be one who has the capacity and ability to understand the social/political/cultural aspects of a religion as well as understand the historical underpinnings, along with central texts, beliefs and practices of different world religion in their historical and contemporary manifestations. Most of my interviewees noted during our conversation the significance of deconstructing the concept of religion before they delve into discussion about

Islam. However, the anthropomorphization, or objectification, of Islam is a deep concern, especially amongst Muslim teachers. This is where Talal Asad's theory of approaching Islam as a discursive tradition can be really useful. One of my interviewees who is currently teaching a World Religion course mentioned that she uses this anthropological approach before she introduces Islam. In fact, some of the interviewees who came across applying a more complex and critical approach in teaching about Islam are now teaching Islam through other disciplines. The challenge, as pointed out during one of my interviews, is a lack of collaborative interdisciplinary work which sometimes not only duplicates work, but also fails to ensure that the person teaching Islamic Studies is qualified and trained Islamicist. The third and final main finding is a deep concern about pedagogical approaches. This area is where I think most work may be needed. From what I have gathered as a result of this research, perhaps the main problem lies with not being able to distinguish between a dominant, normalized, and essentialized Islam which is looked at as an objectified entity, and an Islam that is inherently a collection of diverse interpretive traditions; traditions that are rooted in the past but are not static. That is why scholars and experts in Islamic education are recommending using a contextual, cultural, and critical approach in teaching Islam academically. My sense is that religion as an academic endeavor has the capacity to engage and enable critical thinking which, particularly in a crisis of ignorance, can safeguard humanity and promote greater humanism. I can't resist ending with the following quote from a speech given by His Highness the Aga Khan (Muslim Religious Leader) at the annual meeting of International Baccalaureate in Atlanta, Georgia, in 2008):

*What is essential is that we search.*

*In the final analysis, the great problem of humankind in a global age will be to balance and reconcile the two impulses of which I have spoken: the quest for distinctive identity and the search for global coherence. What this challenge will ultimately require of us, is a deep sense of personal and intellectual humility, an understanding that diversity itself is a gift of the Divine, and that embracing diversity is a way to learn and to grow - not to dilute our identities but to enrich our self-knowledge.*

*What is required goes beyond mere tolerance or sympathy or sensitivity - emotions which can often be willed into existence by a generous soul. True cultural sensitivity is something far more rigorous, and even more intellectual than that. It implies a readiness to study and to learn across cultural barriers, an ability to see others as they see themselves. This is a challenging task, but if we do that, then we will discover that the universal and the particular can indeed be reconciled. As the Quran states: "God created male and female and made you into communities and tribes, so that you may know one another" (49.13). It is our differences that both define us and connect us.*

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**APPENDIX: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

Georgia State University  
Department of Anthropology  
Interview Protocol

Diversity, culture, and Islam in higher education: An Anthropological approach

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The focus of this ethnographic interview is to explore and understand the vision, perspectives, goals, and process of curriculum design, development, methodology, and its implementation. The aim of my study is to engage in a comparative and contextual understanding of different approaches that are being utilized by Professors to enable their students to learn, explore, and find common humanistic ground while acquiring the knowledge and understanding of Islam within the cultural context of world religion. The goal is also to identify best practices as a result of this ethnographic endeavor.

Anything you tell me will not be personally attributed to you or your institution in any articles that result from this study. All the articles will be written in a manner that no individual comment can be attributed to a particular person or an institution. Pseudonyms will be used to ensure the anonymity of both. Therefore, during the interview, please refrain from using names or other identifiable information about yourself or others as an extra precaution. Input from this interview may be shared with my advisor Dr. Cassandra White, the GSU Institutional Review Board, and the Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP). Your participation is completely voluntary. Do you have any questions/concerns before we begin?

1. How is your experience teaching religion especially Islam?
2. Please share positive and negative experiences
3. Challenges and opportunities
4. Personal expectation vs. class room experiences.
5. Effective and not-so effective methodology/pedagogy
6. How do you manage or accommodate cultural variations among your students?
7. How do you negotiate and or accommodate deviant views from a religio/cultural/political perspective?
8. What do you find most challenging about teaching Islam?
9. What do you think contributes to this challenge?
10. Please share your learnings, changed perceptions, new challenges, concerns, etc.
11. Would love to hear your ideas, thought process, and possible pragmatic methodology to approach these challenges.